THIS EXTRAORDINARY BIRTH
Luke 1:39-48
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It was a Thursday night not long ago. Several members of this church were meeting in the library to interview applicants for the recently-established social worker position. Now, Broad Street Presbyterian Church on a Thursday night is a very busy place. The parking lot is full. There are people in the dining room taking a course in accounting. There are people in the gym playing basketball and there are people watching basketball. Those people are cheering, clapping, stomping on the floor. Two stores below there are people in the kitchen clearing up from the choir meal. The choir is rehearsing, and there are three or four other meetings going on. The traffic at the back door is steady and heavy. It is a noisy, slightly chaotic place and in the approximate middle of the building a small committee was interviewing social workers. What I remember is that someone had just asked a particularly good candidate how she coped with the stress of working with economically disadvantaged people all day long, how she fed her spirit and intellect, how she refueled. And she had just said that she stayed pretty healthy because she really did love those people and she thought that the ability to keep loving even when you're tired and depressed and about loved-out was a gift of God, and that she was happy that God had seen fit to give her that gift. And suddenly, through the cold air return in the library, came the sounds of the choir which had just started to work on Handel's "Messiah". What came through the cold air return, as clear as a bell, were the magnificent strains of chorus "And the Glory of the Lord", almost as if someone had arranged it that way to be in perfect counterpoint to what she had just said. I wrote down what I thought sitting at that conference table because it seemed to me that the "Glory of the Lord" is defined rather well by what the social worker said about the gift of loving. What I wrote was to the effect that the Incarnation we observe at Christmas is best celebrated, not by a sophisticated theological treatise delivered from this pulpit, but by all that good, human noise going on here, right on Broad Street, Columbus, in the name of that same Jesus whose Bethlehem birth we are observing.

What comes through each year is this marvelous tension between the sublime beauty of the birth and the real world in which it happened. That translates for me into an equal tension between the gorgeous Christmas celebrations we enjoy and the reality of our world in which any faith worth thinking about must be expressed, articulated, lived. "Can I bear, without breaking apart, this extraordinary birth?" one writer asks and means, I suppose, that there are some very different, almost opposite, ideas to contend with as soon as you begin thinking about God's own son being born in a cow stall.

It is no secret that we are inclined to break that tension and focus on the parts of the feast, the ideas, the vignettes that are manageable. The theological history of the incarnation is the story of people believing either in the divinity of Jesus Chirst, or his humanity, but having a very hard time believing both at the same time. At Christmas we break the tension by Spiritualizing the birth, removing it from anything that resembles real life. The art of the Renaissance did that sometimes. Overwhelmed with the divine mystery of the expectant mother of the Lord, artists in the Middle Ages painted her right out of the human race as an angelic, perfect, madonna. It was an act of adoration, of course, but it broke the tension of incarnation.

Do you recall the great flap when one of the first of the modern translations of the New Testament said that Mary was pregnant instead of "great with child". What a stir when someone simply said what her condition was. People thought it was vulgar, crude, blunt; that somehow if it's Mary and Jesus, "great with child" is better than "pregnant". And what that really means is that we can't bear the tension which is inherent in an incarnation. Mary, mother of Jesus, was pregnant; and what the birth means is that our humanity is blessed, that pregnancy - like all that is human - is blessed by God's appropriation of it as the way to express his love, and that to spiritualize it and miss the humanity, is to badly miss the whole point of the incarnation.

And sometimes we break the tension of the incarnation by simply refusing to see that one of the implications of God's choosing our humanity to live in, is that our humanity can be a lot better, a lot more honest and moral and just and loving than we ever thought: that we can change into better people because of what happened in Bethlehem. William Willimon wrote in a Christian Century recently that the appropriate way to respond to the story of Jesus' birth is not to feel sentimental - but to repent as John the Baptist advised. "Unfortunately", he went on, "we have psychologized the Gospel, turned it into a feeling, transformed the kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah, whom we await, is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear and of all our illusions." (Christian Century, 12/8/82, page 1247)

Well, he is not. He is, we believe, God among us: our judge and our savior. You see, the fundamental Christian claim is the child born in Bethlehem, the man he became, tells us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. This birth makes a very nice story but it is, also, what we Christians know or believe to be, a revelatory event. Every divinity student used to have to read H. Richard Niebuhr's The Meaning of Revelation in which the distinguished theologian wrote:

> "Sometimes when we read a difficult book, seeking to follow a difficult argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole. Revelation is like that. The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ..." (p. 93)

In Jesus Christ we can see what God means by our humanity, and we can also see what God is. Both are troublesome. We would not always choose to be as good, as forgiving, as loving as God has created us to be. There is an inherent tension, therefore, in celebrating this birth. Nor would we choose God to be the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

> "What kind of love is this?", Madeleine L'Engle asked in an essay in Advent.
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> "Cribbed, cabined and confined within the contours of a human infant? Why would he do such a thing? Aren't there easier and better ways for God to redeem his fallen creatures?" (The Irrational Season, page 16)

There is tension between the human and the divine, between the uncompromising righteousness and justice God sent his son to establish, and the moral compromises his latter day sons and daughters make every day of their lives. There is tension between saying "great with child" and "pregnant"; and in the story itself between heavenly hosts and rough shepherds.

he lesson for the day is a corrective. The tension is kept marvelously by St. Luke. The young Mary, according to Luke, was something less than ecstatic with the first announcement of her pregnancy. She was troubled, afraid, and well she should have been. The divine may be about to appear in the flesh, but first there are some very human fears getting expressed by a young girl unexpectedly expectant.

What a thoroughly human pair they make, when Mary packs up and travels to see her elderly cousin, Elizabeth. How thoroughly human the two of them are precisely in their peculiarity: one far too old, the other much too young for what was happening: yet somehow reaching out to each other for support and strength, and receiving both. Elizabeth's baby jumps in her womb when Mary speaks and William Willmon observes that Luke's "first two chapters sound like conversation in an obstetrician's waiting room." (Christian Century, ibid., p. 1276)

We miss part of the power and the beauty of this Christmas gospel when the tension becomes too great and we break it by spiritualizing it. We miss the beauty if we neglect the humanity and the points at which this story connects with our story. God chose human birth for his incarnation. It is the only experience common to every single one of us. Some of us know about it in a most personal way, having given birth, having known about waiting, and worrying and feeling life, and the awkward discomfort, and the pain, and the fear and the glory. And some of us waited and shared what we could, and watched, and we will never forget what we saw as long as we live. God chose that most human of all experiences for his incarnation.

We miss the power and beauty of the Christmas Gospel when we break the tension by removing it geographically from human life. The Christmas cards are adorned with little country churches, mostly, nestled in little villages, white with new fallen snow, candles in windows, smoke curling gently into the early evening sky. The birth did not happen in a setting like that. It was not very placid and peaceful in Bethlehem, I imagine. It must have been a noisy, crowded place. The stable was not pretty. My family and I one time slept in a room directly above five cow stalls, and the odor was so powerful none of us could sleep and we are still talking about it years later. We miss the power if we remove the birth from the rough humanity of its setting. And we miss the secular power and relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ if somehow we remove it from its human base. There is nothing peaceful, placid and gentle about the city. There is very little that is pleasant or pretty in the city blocks surrounding this church. What you will find are people, many of whom are severely hurt. What you will find are people who are hungry, elderly, alone, unemployed, afraid, powerless, helpless; people whose plight - according to current fashionable Washington rhetoric - is their own fault. The gospel of Jesus Christ was meant to be articulated in the middle of that, and on behalf of those poor people, Luke reminds us. As the baby was born in a stable, so

his people are called to their discipleship precisely in the middle of the human city. "And the Glory of the Lord" the choir sang as the social worker talked about loving the poor. The glory of this church, season in and out, is precisely its willingness to be the instrument of the Gospel's secular relevance.

The final tension is the most difficult, I suppose. We would not choose a God who acts like this. We do love the story of the birth, but we would not choose, nor are we very comfortable with the vulnerability, the weakness, the limitation on God to which the story inexorably leads. Given a choice, we would prefer a God whose omnipotent strength controlled history and who, therefore, not only took care of his only son but assures that good things always happen to good people. We do love the little story of baby Jesus, but we'd surely prefer a God who is more demonstrably in control of things in his world.

Every religion deals with it in one way or another. Some regard human suffering as God's will, God's punishment of the wicked or, at least, the way God teaches admirable traits such as endurance, and patience. Some religion tries to explain it in terms of cause and effect. What the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem means to Christians is that God doesn't cause suffering, nor explains it. What the birth of Jesus means is that God identifies with the sufferer: God bears human suffering.

That tension becomessunbearable sometimes and in spite of ourselves we demand to know why God is doing this to us. What have I done to deserve this? If God is good, why is he allowing this to happen? What Christianity says to that most human of questions is that in Bethlehem of Judea, God came among us and was born as we are born and shared our humanity, and suffered and died as we die: and although that is not an explanation it is an expression of a great and unexplanable powerful love which allows us to bear with grace and confidence whatever comes at us.

When her Mother was critically ill she became confused on occasion, frightened, disoriented. Madeleine L'Engle would hold her mother in her arms and say: "It's all right. Don't be afraid. Everything will be all right."

She writes: "What's all right? What am I promising her? I'm scared too. How can I say it? But I do, I hold her close and murmur, it's all right, mother. It's all right.

"I mean those words. I do not understand them. Perhaps one day I will find out what they mean. They are implicit in everything I write. They are behind everything." (The Summer of the Great Grandmother, p. 20)

We may not understand. That is part of the tension. In his Christmas letter, a friend, whose wife died this year, wrote: "We miss her deeply, but I can say that we are beginning to move on, welcoming tomorrow while being richly blessed by the past. I think that is what this season is all about for Christians. It is a look forward in the hope we are allowed in God, who asks us to believe in that which we cannot know for sure." I don't understand what I believe all the time. But with my friend I believe you and I may welcome tomorrow. I, too, believe "it will be all right". And while I may not always understand I can locate the reason why I am able to believe without always understanding. It is because on a dark night, in a stable behind a crowded inn, a young Galilean girl had a baby. I can believe that some ultimate issues about you and me have already been decided and we are unimaginably free to be human and whole and alive because that young girl's baby was Jesus the Christ.

She didn't understand it either, at first. So she shouted: "My soul magnifies the Lord". So it is always best articulated in an embrace - in love extended and accepted - in loud, joyful singing.

The Lord has come. And he shall reign forever. Hallelujah! Amen!